



The MetLife Study of the New Realities of the Job Market for Aging Baby Boomers

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& Associates**

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Executive Summary



What do a 66-year-old sales executive, a 59-year-old mental health counselor, and a 69-year-old technical writer have in common? They are all unemployed late in their careers, but they do not want to retire. In fact, given the costs of living in retirement, they need to keep working. But all three are faced with a similar set of challenges that a growing number of older job seekers will have to confront in the years ahead.

First, they need to negotiate a job market that, in many instances, holds their age against them. They must also find new ways to communicate their own special value to potential employers. And, at the same time, they have to deal with their own mounting ambivalence about working for pay at a time when they thought they would be close to or in retirement.

This study combines three components: in-depth qualitative interviews with 24 leading older-worker job coaches and employment agencies, 21 older employees (retirees and job seekers), and a national survey of 1,242 employed/retired/job-seeking adults ages 55

to 70 years old. While the sample includes adults ages 55 to 70, Baby Boomers (those born 1946–1964) represent the majority and therefore are the primary focus of this study. These expert observations, personal experiences, and national data explore the disconnect between those in their late fifties and sixties who aspire to continue working and the realities of a job market that tends to treat many older job candidates as, at best, irrelevant. It also shows what aging Boomers will have to do in the next few years to be successful in the changing employment market.

Aging Boomers may both need and want to work longer than previous generations, or longer than they may have anticipated. The accompanying *MetLife Aging Boomer Job Market* survey confirmed the findings from the extensive interviews conducted. It found that for U.S. residents ages 55 to 70—who are still working or seeking work—the average age at which respondents expect to stop working for pay is about 70, and that goes up to almost 76 for those ages 66 to 70.

Thanks in part to the recent recession, many older Boomers do not have the retirement savings needed to support them into their mid-eighties. And about three-quarters of today's workers report they expect to work for pay after they retire.¹

Unfortunately, the current job market has other ideas. Historically, fewer than 35% of retirees actually report working for pay after retirement.² This study examines the realities of the job market that produces such disappointing results, and suggests solutions for both job seekers competing in the job marketplace and employers looking to remain competitive in attracting and retaining productive employees.

Key Findings

› A potentially longer work life is a paramount issue for employees

- Fifty percent of the respondents say that within the past two years they have changed their minds about when they will retire—and now it is later than originally expected.
 - › Forty-four percent, however, have not changed their retirement expectations, while only 6% plan to retire earlier than expected.
- Among those who expect to stop working for pay later than expected, two-thirds (67%) say they need to do so to recover/rebuild financial resources for retirement and slightly more than four in 10 (44%) expect to stop working three to five years later than originally planned.
- More than half (55%) of the respondents who are working or seeking work say their primary motivation is needing income for basic expenses.

› Older job seekers and their work opportunities vary greatly

It is misleading to view older job seekers as a homogeneous group. Differences in age (e.g., 58 versus 68), geographic location, types of skills and expertise, and the type of work situation being sought (e.g., full-time versus part-time) all create very different situations for older job seekers. These widely varying scenarios naturally require different job search strategies and tactics.

› “The Significant Seven” (mistakes of older job seekers)

The challenges with employment issues cut both ways. While recognizing that application processes and potential age bias can play a role, aging Boomers also commonly make one or more of seven significant mistakes when looking for work. These mistakes are based on a multitude of false assumptions that include:

- “I’ll just do what I was doing before.”
- “My experience speaks for itself.”
- “I don’t have time for this touchy-feely stuff about what work means to me.”
- “I know! I’ll become a consultant!”
- “Of course I’m good with computers.”
- “I’ll just use a recruiter for some career coaching.”
- “I’ve always been successful, so why should things be different now?”

Identifying and discarding these misguided beliefs and job readiness mistakes are critical steps to creating more successful job searches.

› Wishful thinking is not a job search method

When it comes to effective late-career transitions, job seekers have to realize that wishful thinking is not a job search method. The survey revealed that overall only 36% of respondents have pursued additional skills or training that are required for their jobs or might benefit them in their jobs or their future employability, an absolute necessity for job searches with any hope of success.

The report describes five critical success factors for older job seekers. These include:

- 1) Realistically assessing the changing local employment market in their region
- 2) Translating past experience into future value for a potential employer
- 3) Updating technology skills
- 4) Keeping their network of contacts fresh and active
- 5) Managing their own ambivalence about work in spite of a typically under-capitalized personal retirement fund

Executive Summary

› “Self-employed” may be the new “can’t-find-a-job”

Forty-two percent of respondents ages 66 to 70 report they are self-employed, much higher than the 28% of 61- to 65-year-olds and 19% of 55- to 60-year-olds who reported this. The survey also finds that, among those who are currently seeking work or are retired and unable to find work, 43% state that the primary reason they have not been able to find work was because they could not find an employer who would hire someone their age. Also, the older the worker the more likely they were to cite this as the primary reason, particularly among 66- to 70-year-olds.

› Mid-career workers need to plan now for working later

One of the main applications of this study is that it can encourage early discussion of the new career realities among “mid-careers,” those ages 35 to 50, who will have the benefit of time to plan for working well into their sixties, and whose eligibility age for Social Security will be older.

Many mid-career workers already have the “advantage” of knowing they are not going to have enough savings to retire early and are not sure that they will have a steady stream of income that will last as long as they do.³ But, there are certain things those in their forties can begin doing today to be much better prepared to be a successful and employable worker.

› Creative workforce strategies already used by some companies can give them a competitive advantage now and in the future

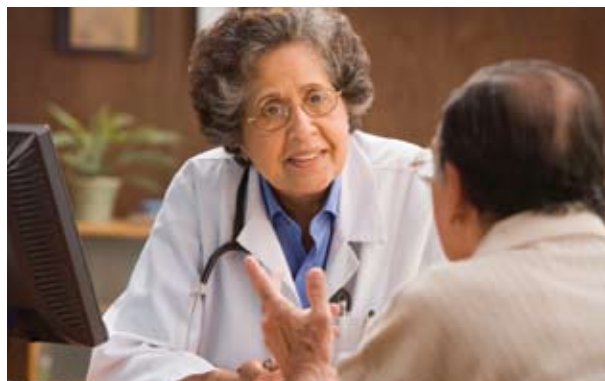
Organizations can take advantage of best practices to engage its employees, including:

- Helping employees think about their late-career plans

- Finding creative ways to identify high potential job candidates, even if they are older
- Looking for situations where a worker’s experience and expertise can add special value
- Identifying environmental factors most attractive to older workers
- Re-examining what in the company’s job application process is excluding qualified candidates

The delicate balance between older job seekers saying “no one will hire me” and employers concluding “just not the right skills for the job” is one that will play out continually over the next two decades. While Boomers move closer to and then into retirement territory, employers will be dealing with issues of potentially longer employee tenure, the impact of “lost knowledge,” and an increasingly multi-generational workforce.

In addition, policymakers will have to wrestle with the larger impact of all this on the national economy, Social Security funding, and pensions. No one will have the advantage of innovative solutions and alternatives, but it is certain that employers and job seekers will have to make accommodations in their expectations, as well as their actions, to resolve the issues that, unlike periodic waves of economic turmoil, won’t go away in the near future.



Introduction

Which of These Scenarios Are You Headed For?

- › At 67, **Victor S.*** has had a long career in marketing high-technology products. But when laid off recently by his latest employer, Victor found himself unexpectedly ambivalent about searching for a new job. He and his wife have enough income to live on from savings and Social Security.

Other interests, such as music, his church, and Habitat for Humanity, are now tempting Victor away from full-time work. Even though he might seek some part-time paid role to keep intellectually active, retirement has become an attractive option.

- › **Marta S.** had hoped to retire at age 59. Now she knows that is not possible. Marta has worked as a hotel office manager, a research analyst for a mortgage company, and a mental health counselor in a large urban hospital. Two years ago, at 57, she lost her health care job in a downsizing initiative, and since then all she has found have been a string of demoralizing temporary jobs.

With virtually no retirement savings or income, Marta entered a government-funded training program to develop the skills needed to pursue job opportunities in hotel banquet work and school administration. In her daily job searches, she has noticed how she is now competing with much younger applicants.

- › A veteran sales and marketing executive, **Rich Z.** has had a successful career in small- and medium-sized manufacturing

and engineering firms. But, at age 66, he has been unemployed for over a year since leaving his last job as vice president of business development in a non-profit after a disagreement with the board of directors. Since being unemployed, Rich's financial situation has changed "drastically," and he now says he will need to work until he is 75.

Several promising opportunities have come along in recent months, but he has consistently lost out to younger candidates, whom, he admits, he would hire too, if it were his decision. Married for 43 years, his wife continues to work as a fitness instructor for senior citizens.

- › **Carla E.** worked in the mortgage industry in southern California for more than 30 years, until she was unceremoniously laid off as the industry went through a major downsizing. Two years later, at age 62, she is still unemployed, her retirement savings all but gone. Carla cannot even get potential employers in other industries to interview her because of her long career in the mortgage business.
- › **Timothy C.** cannot turn his head quickly, and he has learned to live with the pain of five bad discs in his back. Still, at age 56, Tim considers himself lucky. He has a steady job as a "retention specialist" with an employment training agency in a predominantly rural state. Tim had built and sold a successful exterminating business earlier in his career before joining a large technology services company in what he expected would be his last job.

* The names of all older job seekers in this study have been changed to protect their privacy.

Introduction

But when he was laid off two years later, Tim opened a new exterminating business at age 50. Things went well until a major back injury forced him into a long convalescence and wiped out his retirement savings. He applied for scores of jobs. “Out of 100 or more I only got close on one,” he recalled. “It came down to the final interview. But part of the job was loading file boxes. They needed a younger back.” Tim, who is single, now expects to work until he is 70, “or as long as I hold up.”

The recent recession has created millions of new stories of unemployed workers of all ages, but what makes these vignettes compelling is that they describe the very different needs and experiences of older job seekers, a demographic group that will explode in the next decade.

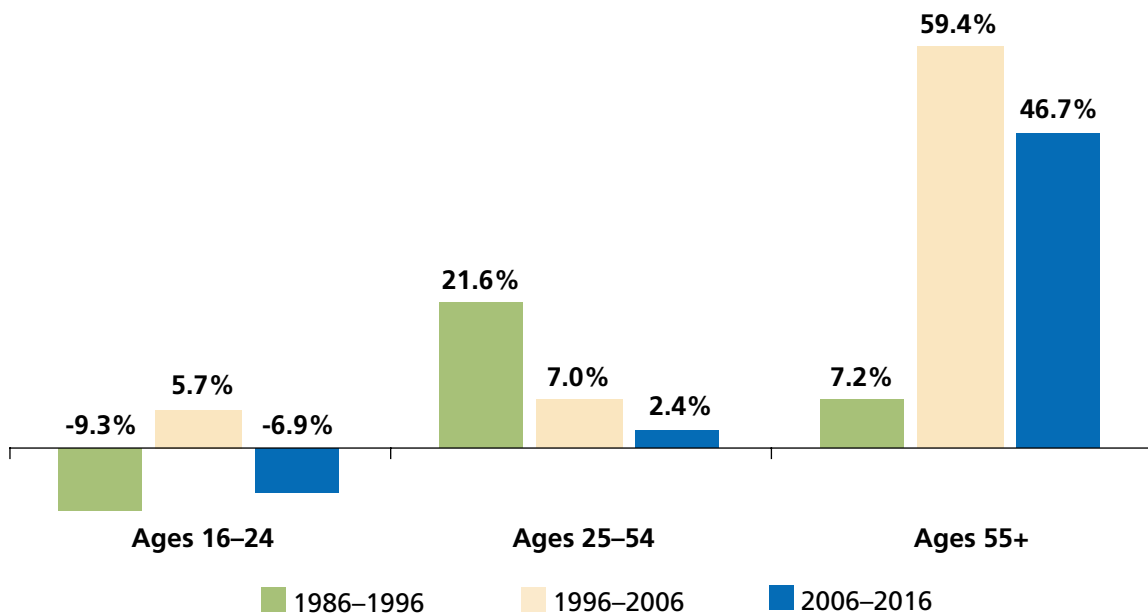
The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that between 2006 and 2016, the U.S. labor force ages 55+ will increase 47% from 25 million to 37 million, while the labor force ages 16 to 54 will

increase less than 1%. The 55+ population will account for almost 93% of the net increase in the U.S. civilian labor force.⁴ This means there will be millions of Baby Boomers looking for work to prolong their careers in the years ahead.

This is, in part, because many aging Boomers lack the retirement savings they will need to support themselves well into their eighties. *The MetLife Aging Boomer Job Market* survey reveals that more than 60% of those ages 55 to 70, who are working or seeking work, have less than \$250,000 in retirement savings.⁵ In addition, Baby Boomers, who are healthier than previous generations, report they want and need to work longer.

According to recent surveys, about three-quarters of today’s workers expect to work for pay even after they retire.⁶ But, historically, fewer than 35% of retirees actually report working for pay after retirement.⁷

Figure 1: Labor Force Trends, Percent Change: 1986–2016



Source: Mitra Toossi, “Labor Force Projection to 2016: More Workers in Their Golden Years,” *Monthly Labor Review*, November 2007, pages 33-52.

Thus, there is a compelling disconnect between the growing size and availability of the aging labor pool and the historical lack of success those in this age group looking for work have had in finding paid employment. If aging Boomers are going to find the jobs they want, and if organizations are going to secure the productive talent they need, then older job seekers must learn to be more successful in the changing labor market.

This study explores four major questions in order to help individual job seekers, organizations, and policy makers more effectively address the dynamics of the job market for aging Baby Boomers.**

1) *What are the key characteristics differentiating older job seekers and influencing their success in finding employment to meet their needs?*

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to finding employment for this age group. Older job seekers come with a broad range of work histories, current objectives, personality traits, skills, and potential health issues that shape their options and strategies. Understanding these differences is key to identifying and pursuing successful employment solutions for this generation.

2) *What are the most damaging mistakes that older job seekers make when pursuing work opportunities?*

The expectations older Boomers have about working after age 55 are often painfully unrealistic. Earnest, well-prepared job seekers in their fifties and sixties are often totally unprepared for the responses of potential employers. Identifying the faulty assumptions that create these unrealistic expectations is the first step to avoiding their negative consequences.

** This study consistently refers to the employment challenges of "aging Baby Boomers," who currently range in age from 45 to 63. The focus of the research was actually on job seekers ages 55 to 70. While the active job seekers in this group are more likely to be aging Boomers, our sample also includes those ages 64 to 70. The research findings are relevant for members of both generations.



3) *What are the key things that experience shows older job seekers must be doing to be successful in finding work?*

Most older job seekers fail to recognize several critical areas they must consciously manage to be successful in finding employment—either full- or part-time—at this stage of their careers.

4) *What should mid-career workers be doing today to be better positioned to succeed in the job market as they grow older?*

The experiences of older Boomers, who are currently struggling with late-career employment issues, provide potential lessons for today's mid-career workers (ages 35 to 50). Experienced middle-aged workers should start preparing now to be more successful in the job market when they are older. This section will report on what our research suggests they should be doing today.

Key Characteristics Differentiating Older Job Seekers

As with every generation, there are many dimensions that differentiate the behaviors and options of Baby Boomers in the employment marketplace. Job search challenges and solutions cannot be specified unless it is recognized that individuals start in different places and have varying objectives for employment as they age.

Listed below are five dimensions identified in the research as differentiating older job seekers. These have a significant impact on job seekers' success in finding suitable employment.⁸ Answering these questions is the place to start.

1) *How old are you?*

The research shows that a 56-year-old is usually a very different job candidate than a 68-year-old. There are exceptions, of course, but a vigorous 50-something is still seen as having more options, particularly for full-time employment, than someone in their late sixties.

One 68-year-old former technical manager said: "Age discrimination is rampant. It is totally ridiculous." All things being equal, the work

As soon as they see gray hair when you walk into an interview, they seem to eliminate you.

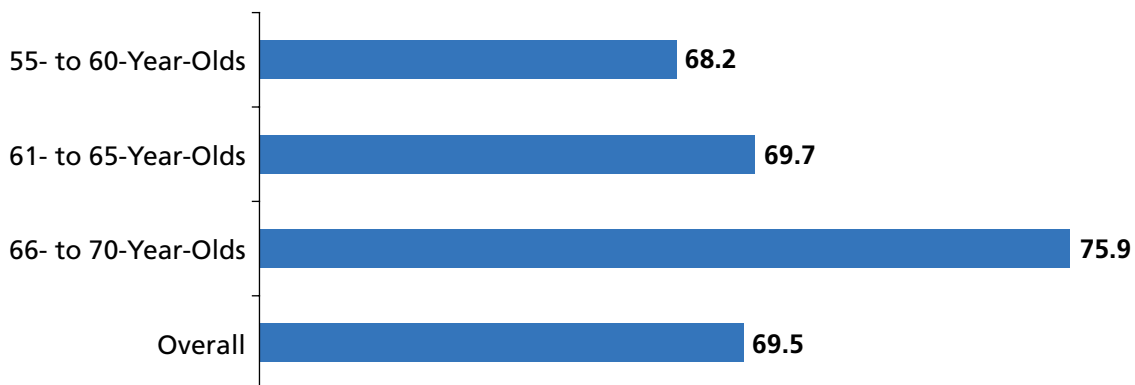
— 68-year-old former technical manager

options for someone in their late fifties are usually significantly different than for someone a decade older.

How the market reacts to differences in age is significant because many aging Baby Boomers have made it clear they intend to work longer than earlier generations. In the survey findings for this study, the average age that respondents who are working or seeking work said they expected to stop working for pay was about 70. It is worth noting that respondents ages 66 to 70, who are working or seeking work, reported that they planned to stop working at age 76.

These expectations seem to be seriously at odds with the research noted earlier, which shows fewer than 35% of retirees actually report working for pay as long as they had planned.

Figure 2: Age Expected to Stop Working Completely



Question: At what age do you expect to stop working for pay completely?

Base: Currently working or seeking work.

To close this gap, aging Boomers are going to have to develop much more effective job search strategies that reflect, in part, an understanding of how the market responds to candidates of different ages.

2) *Where do you live?*

Where older job seekers live will also seriously affect their chances for employment. Obviously, aging Boomers who live in places that currently suffer from above average unemployment, such as Michigan, Oregon, or South Carolina, will have a harder time finding work than those who live in areas that are growing or that have lower unemployment rates, such as North Dakota, Nebraska, or Utah.⁹

One angry 58-year-old in a northern state, who had recently found a part-time job in a local retail business, said: “This area has the highest unemployment in the state. I’m one of the underemployed, and I’m told ‘You should be happy you even have a job.’ It makes me sick.” Like every job seeker, the opportunities available to aging Boomers will be significantly determined by where they live and whether they are willing to relocate for work.

3) *Are your skills specialized and relatively unique, or more generic and widely held?*

Like it or not, most older job seekers must compete with younger and cheaper candidates. Many aging Boomers have what hiring managers perceive as relatively common skills and capabilities developed from years of working in fields such as sales and marketing, hospitality and food service, office administration, manufacturing, program management, and even information technology.

Those who have more specialized skills and knowledge that are valued by hiring managers are in a stronger position to get hired. For example, aging Boomers whose careers have led them to develop expertise in areas such as advanced systems engineering, specialty

manufacturing processes, insurance risk management, esoteric accounting regulations, or specialized welding techniques are more likely to be successful in the job market than those with more generic skills.

It does not matter how unique or valuable individuals think their capabilities are; it is how the market views them that counts. Carleen MacKay, career coach and author of *Boom or Bust: New Career Strategies in a New America*, explains: “Especially as you age, it’s good to get out of the generalist role.”

For people over 60, specialization is key.

—Carleen MacKay,
Career coach and author

Of course, this advice is not much use to the millions of low skill/low wage Boomers who will be seeking work in the next decade. By definition, their skills are generic and viewed as readily replaceable with younger, cheaper workers, which puts this group at a particular disadvantage in the job market.

4) *Are you seeking a full-time job with benefits, or part-time, or temporary work?*

Older job seekers have a range of needs. Some, particularly those in their fifties and early sixties, are still looking for full-time positions with benefits, especially health insurance. Others are seeking part-time work and do not expect benefits, but need the income to supplement whatever retirement savings and Social Security benefits they have.

Still others are looking for temporary or seasonal work, primarily to stay active and socially connected. The additional income provided by the work is viewed as nice to have, but it is a secondary objective.

Key Characteristics Differentiating Older Job Seekers

In the survey, of those who are currently working or seeking work, 50% are now expecting to work for pay longer than they planned before the recent recession. Forty-four percent have not changed their retirement expectations, while only 6% plan to retire earlier than previously expected.

Of those who plan to work longer, 69% expect to work at least three years more. Not surprisingly, two-thirds (67%) of those who expect to work longer say it is to “recover/rebuild financial resources for retirement.”

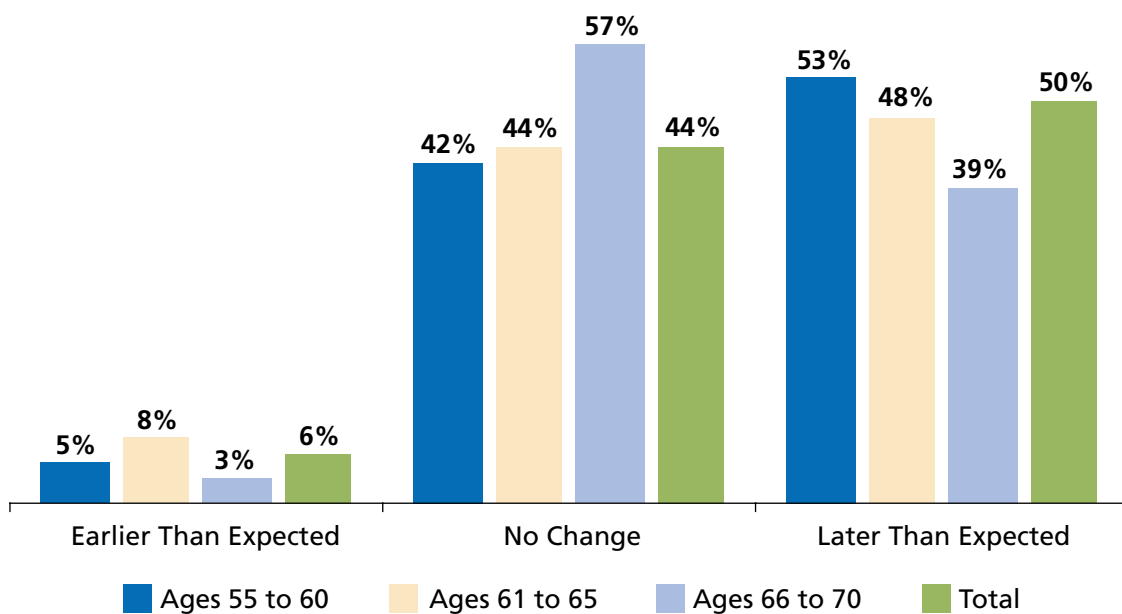
Aging Boomers face different challenges, depending on the type of work situation they are seeking. There is a consensus among Boomer job coaches and employment experts that by age 58 it becomes very difficult, though not impossible, to find full-time positions with benefits, particularly in large organizations. That is why small- to medium-sized companies and non-profits, as well as self-employment, often become more realistic options for older job seekers.

The trend is that project-based or temporary work is becoming the most common option for older workers, but that doesn't work well for those still in their fifties, who need a more stable income and health insurance.

—Art Koff,
Founder, RetireBrains.com

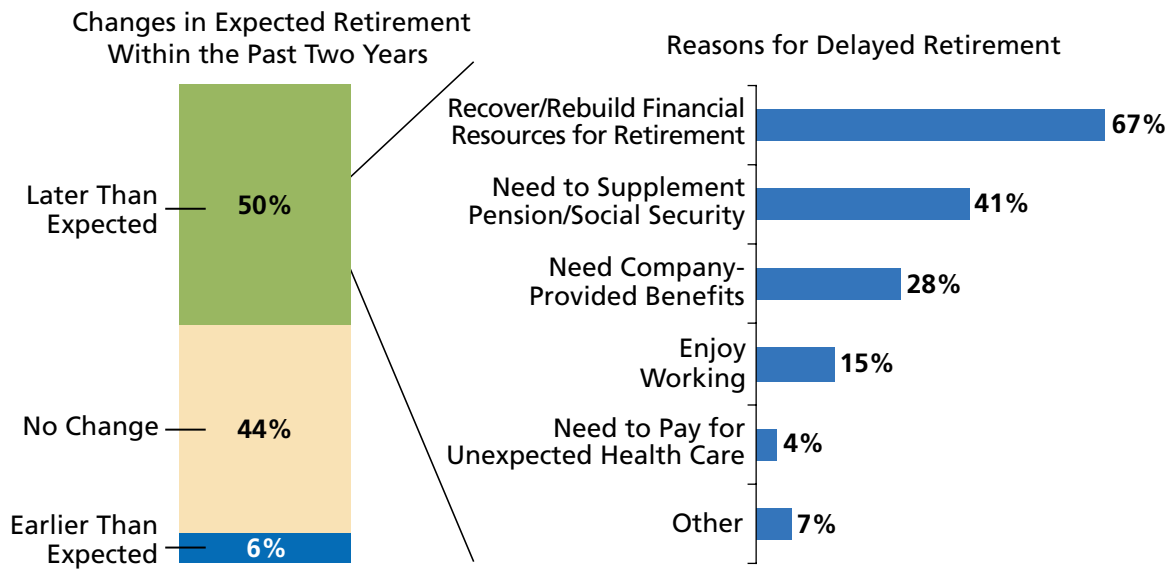
In reality, the older the job seekers are, the more likely their only viable work options are going to be part-time. This also aligns with the strong inclination toward “slowing down,” expressed by many people in their sixties. The desire for more flexible part-time work schedules among aging Boomers is well documented, although the recent recession has created more compelling financial reasons for older workers to put in more hours.

Figure 3: Changes in Expected Retirement Within the Past Two Years



Question: Within the past two years, has your expectation about when you will stop working for pay changed? Are you now expecting to stop working for pay...?

Figure 4: Why Are They Delaying Retirement?



Question: Within the past two years, has your expectation about when you will stop working for pay changed? Are you now expecting to stop working for pay...?

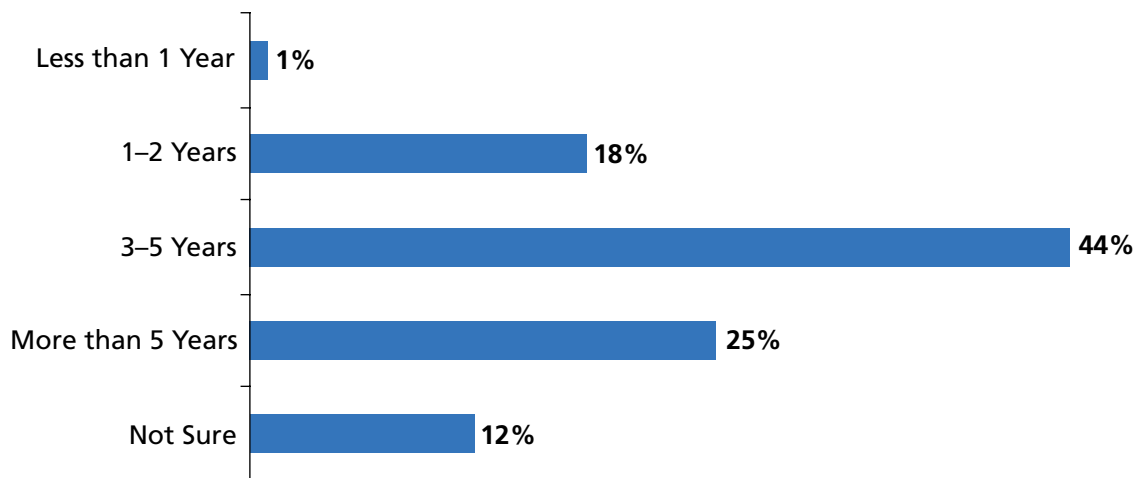
Question: Why are you now expecting to stop working for pay later? Multiple responses permitted.

Base: Expecting to stop working later.

The survey results show people in their sixties are much more likely to be working part-time, and most prefer it that way. About 58% of respondents ages 66 to 70 reported working part-time, compared to 19% for those ages 55 to 60. Of those working part-time, 22% said they would prefer to work full-time.

It is unclear how the tension will be resolved between the natural desire of many aging Boomers to slow down and cut back their work hours and the increased need for late-career incomes due to diminished retirement savings.

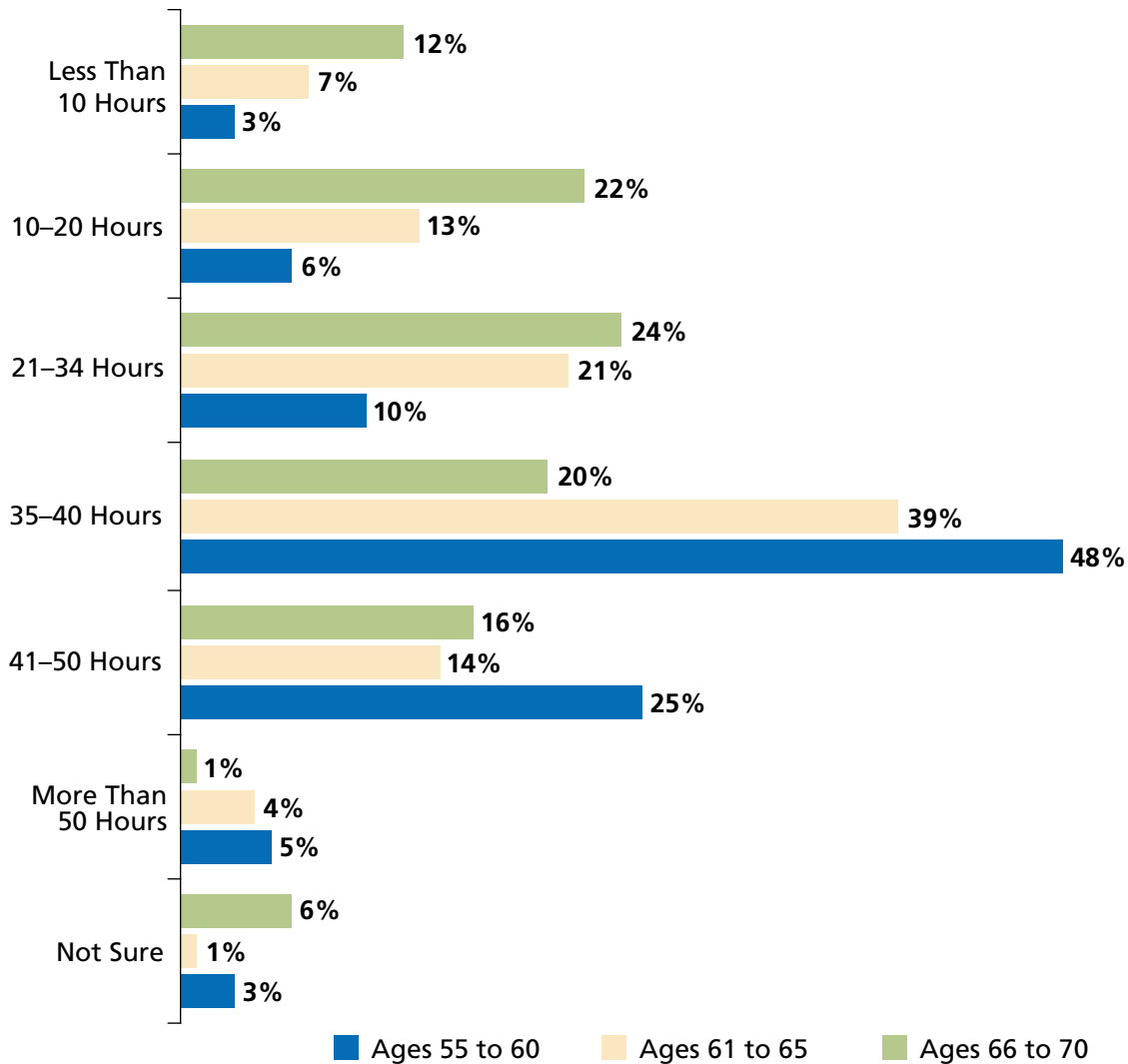
Figure 5: How Long Are They Delaying Retirement?



Question: How much later than you expected will you did you stop working for pay?
Base: Expecting to stop working later.

Key Characteristics Differentiating Older Job Seekers

Figure 6: Hours of Work Per Week



Question: How many hours per week do you (currently/want to) work for pay?

Base: Currently working or seeking work.

5) *Are you trying to recreate your old job, or reinvent a new way of working?*

One veteran author looking for part-time work said, “If I get a writing job, it has to be my writing. I don’t want to be compiling information for somebody’s newsletter. And I don’t want anything that’s demanding in terms of a deadline.” This 70-year-old was trying to recreate the work she has done in much of her career.

Compare her approach to the 65-year-old training coordinator who said, “When I lost my corporate job 10 years ago, I thought I was unemployable. Today, I know there are many places I can get work because I’ve discovered all kinds of skills I didn’t know I had. You have to reinvent yourself to be employable.”

Our research shows that the degree of adaptability to the changing market is a dimension that significantly differentiates older job seekers. Many aging Boomers are simply looking for the same job they had previously. Others are more open to change. The individual's level of adaptability and resilience is a critical factor in determining success in the job market. Part of adaptability is reflected in a job seeker's or worker's willingness to invest in additional training.

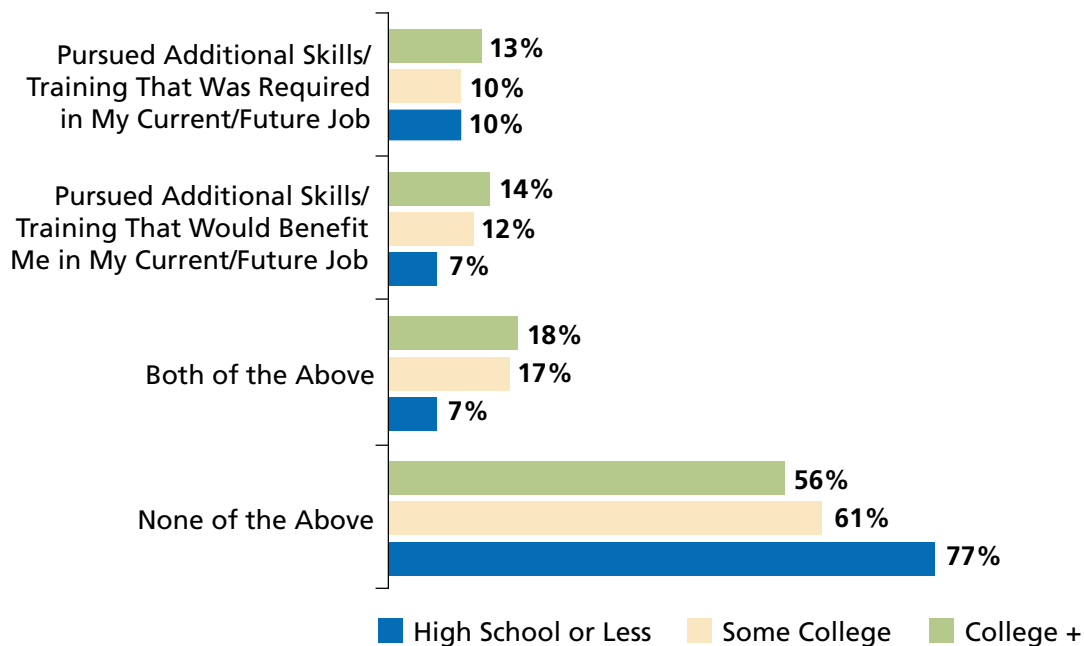
Surprisingly, the survey shows that only 25% of those working reported seeking skills/training that they felt would benefit them in their jobs or future employment. And 27% of those seeking work reported pursuing additional skills or training to improve their future job prospects. Also notable was the fact that those with a high school education or less were significantly less likely to pursue additional training than those with more education.

Certainly, there are other dimensions that differentiate older job seekers. These include:

- Level of self-confidence
- Previous experience in conducting job searches
- Level of self-awareness/self-knowledge
- Motivation to learn
- Limitations imposed by personal or spousal health issues

The five characteristics described in detail in this section—age, geographic location, type of skills, full- or part-time work, and replicating versus reinventing a work role—provide the most obvious and least ambiguous distinctions among Baby Boomers seeking employment. Understanding these differences is the first step toward developing more customized job search strategies that meet the varying needs of older job seekers.

Figure 7: Pursuit of Training Opportunities



Question: Within the last two years, have any of the following applied to you?

Seven Mistakes That Keep Aging Boomers Unemployed

The pool of older job seekers varies widely in age, skill level, and the type of work situations they are seeking. However, our research found at least seven mistakes people in this demographic group often make when looking for work.

These mistakes are based in part on false assumptions derived from past experience and wishful thinking. They result in wasted time and effort and great frustration for older job seekers. Identifying these misguided beliefs is a key step to creating more successful job searches.

1) *“I’ll just do what I was doing before.”*

Many aging Boomers in the job market assume they can simply continue on their previous career path, as if their age and the changing work environment were irrelevant.

“It’s amazing how executives over 50, who have been successful in big corporate jobs, assume they can just transition into another one,” said a veteran executive recruiter, “even though they have no experience selling themselves and have built no network outside their corporations.”

The lack of experience with job hunting is not the only barrier for aging Boomers who want to continue on the same career path. “There’s going to be age discrimination and there’s nothing you can do about it,” said Mark Anderson, president of ExecuNet, an executive recruiting and career management company.¹⁰

There are exceptions, of course, but most aging Boomers who assume they are going to continue on their career paths in new full-time roles are likely to be shocked at the market’s resistance to their plans. Not only do younger hiring managers look at them skeptically for a variety of reasons, but the skills needed in the new job have probably evolved since they took on their last role.

The best you can do is demonstrate passion and energy and that you’re as valuable as the competition.

— Mark Anderson,
President, ExecuNet

Older job seekers need to be able to see themselves doing something else and using their skills in new ways, or they will become increasingly frustrated with the market’s response.

2) *“My experience speaks for itself. Lots of employers would be lucky to have me.”*

“What has continually surprised me is how much I know and how much managers are willing to underrate me. It is very, very frustrating. They say, ‘We want somebody cheaper, not somebody who knows more,’” lamented one 63-year-old unemployed public policy expert.

Older job seekers often assume that hiring managers will automatically recognize the value that their extensive experience brings to the organization. This assumption is wrong for three reasons. First, it takes the focus off of what is needed in the marketplace today. “If you don’t understand how to link your experience explicitly to the employer’s current needs, then you get discounted even before the interview,” said Boomer career coach Carleen MacKay.

Second, older job seekers consistently reported that they felt their extensive work experience was held against them. “You spend your whole career trying to get enough experience, then you wake up one day and you’ve got too much,” noted an unemployed 59-year-old lawyer. “When you see ads for positions, they’re

seeking eight to 12 years of experience. You never see them asking for 15 or more years.”

One reason hiring managers may respond negatively to the extensive experience on many Boomer resumés is they equate it with higher salary requirements. In practice, this may not be the case—52% of our survey respondents are earning what they expected in their current jobs, with 36% earning less and only 12% earning more.

“Another reason experience doesn’t ‘speak for itself’ is that it is simply less respected in many organizations today,” said Richard Leider, executive coach and co-author of *Something to Live For: Finding Your Way in the Second Half of Life*. Leider continued: “I’ve found that the more technological a society becomes, the less wisdom is valued. We’ve got more information than we can handle today, but where is the wisdom on the Internet?”

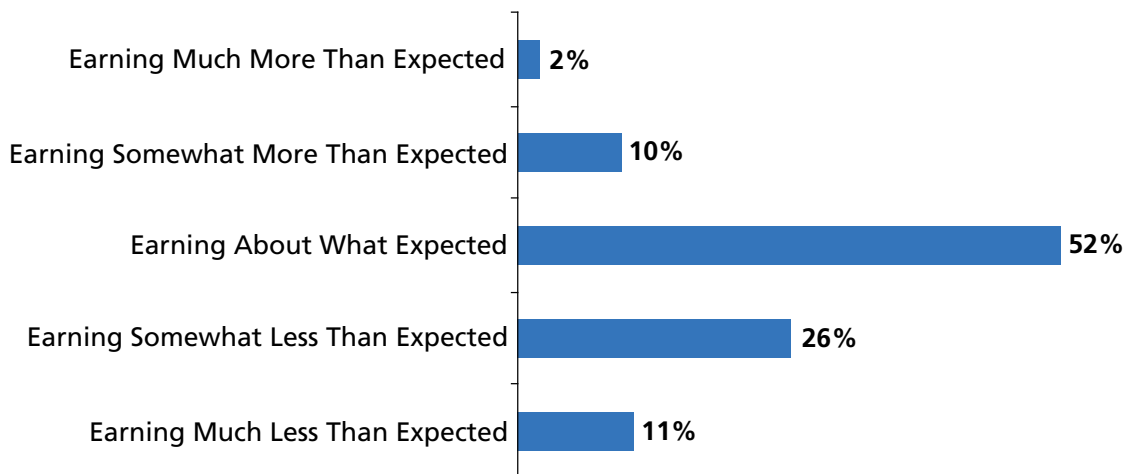
Once we understand the way that know-how is actually perceived in job searches, older job seekers can refocus on using their experience to demonstrate how they can solve problems in the future. “You’ve got to be able to explain to the employer how you’re going to make them a success,” said Charlotte Tenney, director of a federally funded elder job training program in San Diego.

3) “I’ve always been successful, so why should things be different now?”

The faulty reasoning in this piece of self-deception goes something like this: “The market for manufacturing in California may be shrinking, but I only want one job.” The problem is that for one job in one company, there are usually many, many applicants. Workers approaching retirement who do not see a lot of options for themselves are particularly prone to denial about how changes in the workplace are affecting their chances for continued employment.

Behaving as if the past is the best predictor of the future can draw on several types of denial that lead older job seekers to make poor decisions. First, there is a tendency to ignore the impact of strategic changes in industries or companies that threaten long-term job stability. “When I’m working with people laid off from manufacturing jobs,” said Houston Doan, who runs an employment program for 55+ job seekers in Nebraska, “they assume they can get another job paying \$22 an hour. But those jobs don’t exist anymore. Today, an \$8 an hour job in Lincoln is a good job.”

Figure 8: Perception of Job Earnings



Question: In your current job, how would you describe your earnings?

Base: Currently working.

Seven Mistakes That Keep Aging Boomers Unemployed

In today's job market, because of the pressure for performance, it's about ability, not seniority.

— **Renee Ward,**
Founder, Seniors4Hire.org

Older job seekers, particularly those in their sixties, are also likely to deny how things have changed in organizations, clinging to values that once were dominant in many corporations. The idea that seniority would provide protection from layoffs or would be an advantage in job hunting is long gone.

Those who have retired for a few years and then decide to return to work are also unlikely to recognize how things have changed, reported several experts. They often are not prepared for the severe competition to get a good job today.

In addition, looking at organizations as they were, and not as they are becoming, can lead older job seekers to ignore the fact that they will be reporting to a younger supervisor. They must demonstrate that they can adapt to this new dynamic, while also accepting the increased ambiguity and fluidity of job descriptions today.

Houston Doan said, “You used to be hired to do a specific job. But, today, older workers can be alienated by the lack of clarity in their job duties. Responsibilities are not only blurred by changing economic conditions, but also by the increased importance of teams in the workplace. Many older job seekers have not demonstrated the ability to ‘play well with others.’”

Focusing on what made an aging job seeker successful in the past, and assuming that is what hiring managers are looking for in the future, often creates a longer and more frustrating job search.

4) “I just need a job. I don’t have time for this touchy-feely stuff about what work means to me.”

“I’ve gone into interviews and they ask me, ‘What is your vision of this job?’ Well, I don’t have one. This New Age stuff makes me sick,” recalled one frustrated 57-year-old.

Lots of older job seekers do not take time to recognize how their skills could be more clearly linked to things they really care about to create a more productive and satisfying employment opportunity. Instead, they rush headlong into the field they know, or they take an “I-will-do-anything” approach, ignoring their own and the market’s real needs.

Houston Doan described a 72-year-old woman, recently widowed, who came looking for a data-entry job because that is what she had done for years before retiring. Doan probed a little about the woman’s hobbies and interests and learned that she had started a highly successful local chapter of the Make-A-Wish Foundation®. Doan recalled, “I asked ‘Would you like to do what you did for Make-A-Wish and make money at it?’ She ended up working for a local foundation, and she did a great job because she had wonderful people skills and excellent connections. But, she wanted a job in data entry because that was what she thought of as work.”

Research shows lots of aging Boomers want to make a change, but they do not know what they want to do next. Somehow they think they can get through this transition without doing some serious reflection about their strengths, passions, and values. Because the market’s perception of their value can be dramatically different, aging Boomers need to think carefully about the value they bring and how they approach their job search.

5) *“I’ll just use a recruiter or some career coaching to get another job.”*

The instinct to get help is right. Older job seekers who try to go it alone make it much more difficult for themselves, shared Richard Leider. That is because they need feedback and fresh perspectives to clarify what value they bring to employers and where they should be looking.

Unfortunately, this expertise is only available to a limited number of those who need it and the help available is often misunderstood. One counselor to older corporate executives who find themselves out of a job noted, “They expect that 59 headhunters are going to call and offer them the perfect job. But the phone stops ringing in two weeks when their fair-weather friends fade away. Part of it is because of their age. They’re competing against younger Boomers.”

At the other end of the economic spectrum, the director of one employment training program said her participants often view the program as some kind of “labor union hiring hall.” “They think there’s some magical place they can go and someone has secret information that will be the perfect job for them,” she explained.

We have people coming in who don’t understand that they’ll have to get the job themselves. They’re looking for someone to save them.

—Director of an employment training program

Being unemployed and really needing to work for income can be very disorienting for those in their fifties and sixties who have not looked for a job in decades. This leads to all kinds of unrealistic expectations that only undermine the real work to be done.

6) *“I know the answer! I’ll become a consultant... or maybe a security guard!”*

Experts report that older job seekers often make unrealistic and untested assumptions about the type of work that is right for them. As a result, they go after jobs that prove to be a poor fit. For example, Mark Anderson, head of ExecuNet, said about 30% of the older executives he works with are interested in becoming consultants, but only one in five has the sales and marketing expertise to succeed.

Highly skilled older executives and professionals are not the only ones making faulty assumptions about jobs that prove to be a bad fit. “A lot of folks think they want to be security guards,” said Charlotte Tenney, who runs an employment training program for those ages 55+ in San Diego. “But, typically, that means they’re on their feet all the time, working late at night, and all alone. It’s a recipe for disaster.”

Often jobs that appear to be the path of least resistance for older job seekers prove to be unsatisfying and costly. At first, the job seems to make sense. After all, it provides income and it is available.

The risk comes in not exploring the actual skills needed to be successful, the physical demands of the job, or the psychological fit. The result is a temporary and unsatisfying work experience that is one more thing to be explained away to the next hiring manager.

Many professionals don’t recognize the nuances of becoming a successful entrepreneur.

— Brad Lawson,
President, YourEncore

The Employment Resource System Is Busted

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates a 47% increase in the U.S. labor force ages 55+ between 2006 and 2016. This means there will be millions of aging Baby Boomers looking to prolong their careers in the years ahead. But there is relatively little government infrastructure in place to address this growing problem.

There are, of course, many good career coaches and counselors who specialize in helping successful professionals, managers, and executives make the transition into late-career employment opportunities. Fortunately, many of these aging Baby Boomers have the financial resources to afford personal coaching and workshops.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) is the long-running program funded by the Department of Labor (Title V, Older Americans Act) designed to help low income citizens ages 55+ who want to go back to work.

These programs are run by local agencies around the country to provide essential training, coaching, and internships that help low-income clients find employment. The problem is the SCSEP programs, along with smaller programs like Operation ABLE, cannot meet the growing demand for their services. A recent report by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University estimated more than nine million people ages 55 to 74 were eligible for SCSEP services, which was more than 100 times the number of people actually served by the program in recent years.¹¹

In San Diego, placement coordinator Charlotte Tenney estimates there are 99 people eligible

for every person receiving SCSEP services. In Montgomery County, Maryland, the program is funded to train 81 people and the waiting list is usually 75 to 100, according to program director Harriet Shapiro. “We get calls from many people who are not eligible,” she said, “and I refer them to the One-Stop Career Centers.”

These career centers, funded by the Federal Workforce Investment Act, are the way the government provides employment and training services to workers of all ages. They provide a job matching service, and most centers offer career counseling and help with resumé writing. While the centers try to accommodate older workers, the problem is they are evaluated on their placement rates, the retention of clients placed in new jobs, and the new worker’s level of earnings.

All of these measures are much more difficult to sustain when serving older job seekers, who are more difficult to place and more likely to take lower paying part-time work.¹² Thus, the One-Stop Career Centers are not intended to serve aging Boomers, and their counselors are less likely to be trained in the special needs of older job seekers. That leaves SCSEP and programs like Operation ABLE as the primary employment resources for aging Boomers with limited assets.

Pat Elmer, who oversees the program in Vermont, explained: “SCSEP is a very important program, but there is no way in the world it can address the needs of Boomers because there are so many of them. This generation is absolutely unprepared for what’s coming. Many Boomers thought they could take early retirement and jump back into a part-time job when they wanted to. But they’re finding it’s not that easy.”



7) “Of course I am good with computers. I have been working with Windows 98 for years!”

An unemployed bookkeeper in Maryland insists on putting on his resumé that he uses DOS.¹³ It is not always this extreme, but job counselors constantly confront aging Baby Boomers who have unrealistic expectations about the relevance of their computer skills and what the market expects today.

Like it or not, hiring managers will often judge an older job seeker’s potential fit in their organizations based on the competency they demonstrate with current technologies. Aging Boomers who do not continually bring their technology skills up to date create serious barriers for themselves in the job market.

There are two ways that Boomers develop gaps in their technology know-how. Those who have

been out of the workplace for more than a couple of years are naturally likely to fall behind, unless using computers at home is an avocation.

The more common problem is with older job seekers who have worked in one organization for a long time. “I had always used Windows 95 in my exterminating business,” said Timothy C., a 56-year-old training counselor in Vermont. “It was all set up, and I saw no reason to upgrade. But, by the time I got into the job market, companies were using Office 2007, which is different.”

In a highly competitive job market, not having up-to-date computer skills gives hiring managers one more reason to reject older job seekers and helps support the bias that they will not fit in their organization.

A lot of the faulty assumptions described in this section grow out of ignoring changes—in oneself, the job market, and the technologies that drive them. Finding employment as an aging Boomer means embracing—not denying—these changes and using what is learned to create new solutions. These solutions will not be easy or obvious at first, and nobody is going to do it for you.



Wishful Thinking Is *Not* a Job Search Method

Five Keys to Success for Older Job Seekers

Specific actions older job seekers should be taking to increase their chances of success in the job market are more than simply a matter of wishful thinking and hoping for the best.¹⁴ Yet these often characterize the beliefs about employment and work re-engagement strategies held by many older job seekers. There are, however, some simple yet effective techniques to get ready for a job search with some prospect of being successful.

1) *Acknowledge the New Realities of the Job Market*

“When 50-year-olds call me and start complaining about age discrimination,” said Robert Skladany of RetirementJobs.com, “I tell them ‘Get over it!’”

Anger about age bias will not get you a job. You’ve probably got 15 to 20 years more to work. So deal with it, and go sell yourself as a good long-term investment.

— Robert Skladany,
RetirementJobs.com

The dominant view, as borne out in multiple studies, is that age bias is a major barrier to the employment of older job seekers (see *Endnote 10*). There is a minority view, which appeared in some of our interviews, that this bias is only there because people expect to see it. But the anecdotal evidence from our interviews was pretty overwhelming.

Older job seekers often experience being treated differently than younger candidates. Plenty of Boomers we interviewed are angry about

that, and more will be in the future when they experience this bias personally. But being angry does not solve the problem of finding a job.

The fact is there are still opportunities for older job seekers, and these will increase in many sectors as the latest recession recedes. Skladany noted that before the economic downturn, he had seen a dramatic increase in the willingness of employers to consider older applicants, particularly engineers, scientists, and information technology experts.

This is because the education system is not creating enough skilled young talent to fill these roles. “This hiring trend came to a screeching halt with the recession,” Skladany admitted. But when business improves in the years ahead, demand for highly skilled older technical and scientific talent is likely to pick up again.

In the meantime, older job seekers can do three things to better understand the market.

- A) First, identify industries and organizations in the region that are growing, or at least stable. Skladany pointed to the food industry, transportation, utilities/energy, health care, and accounting as sectors that do reasonably well, even in bad times.
- B) Second, look for organizations that have demonstrated a management style and workforce culture that is respectful of all workers. RetirementJobs.com, for example, has more than 60 companies that pass this test through its “Age Friendly Employer Certification Program.” In addition, AARP has its “Best Employers” awards, which is another way to identify firms to approach. Some industries need seasonal help, like retail stores and accounting firms, and may also be older-worker friendly.

C) Finally, older job seekers are wise to look for opportunities in small- to medium-sized companies, that are well-known to create the majority of new jobs in the economy. Smaller firms are much more likely to take on aging Boomers who bring a track record of accomplishment and who can clearly add value. The downside is they may pay significantly less than bigger firms.

H&R Block wants temporary accountants during tax season, and they couldn't care less about your age.

— Art Koff,
RetiredBrains.com

Older job seekers also must be careful to match their needs to the work style expectations of these smaller firms. Pat Elmer, who directs an employment training program for low income 55+ Vermonters, explained, “We find many progressive small businesses are managed by young people, who create a very different 24/7 workplace. This is not flexibility as we think of it. This means when they want you, you have to be flexible. This is not what most older people want.”

Self-employment is one other option to consider seriously. This is clearly one of the most attractive options to those ages 66 to 70. The survey showed that 42% of respondents ages 66 to 70 reported that they were self-employed. We suspect that this is further evidence of the more limited work options for this age group.

Another recent survey showed that from December 2007 to June 2009, the number of older self-employed workers (ages 55+) in non-agricultural industries increased by 10%.¹⁵ This indicates that a migration of older workers to self-employment is one way they are coping with losing jobs from larger organizations.

2) *Reframe Experience to Demonstrate Future Value*

To succeed in today's job market, aging Boomers must identify and articulate what specific value they can bring to an organization, while simultaneously recognizing that their underlying skill base must be constantly evolving. For example, knowledge of Internet marketing was still new for most marketing managers eight years ago. Today, it is a prerequisite for working in marketing.

No matter what, job seekers should have a basic awareness of their strengths, passions, and values. Author and executive coach Richard Leider explained:

It's not just about networking and brand building. It's about clarifying what you have to offer and developing the contacts you need to be taken seriously. It takes a lot of time to identify the space you want to play in and to build the foundation needed to act confidently in that area.

It's not easy work. But, if you don't do it, you will likely be unemployed longer because older job seekers have to be clear about the relevance of their skills and the value-add of their experience, even if they're going for the same job in another place.

In reality, of course, many Boomers are not going to have the patience, temperament, or financial resources to be this reflective. “It's hard to talk about these things when people are just asking, ‘Where are the jobs?’” admits Leider.

Even if the amount of reflection is limited, older job seekers need to recognize that they are not writing a resumé for where they have been, but for where they are going. “Even the guy who has been in prison 25 years has a work history, in the upholstery shop and as a supervisor,” said one employment counselor. “The point is how can that work experience help others in the future. That's what he's selling.”

3) *Nurture Your Network*

Of course, every job seeker needs to use what network they have, but it is especially critical for aging Boomers who must count on personal relationships to cut through the impersonal electronic application process and the age bias in the marketplace.

Without networking, you're cooked.

— 69-year-old laid off technical writer

The 69-year-old laid off technical writer above continued: “Those doing the hiring have become totally inaccessible because of the online job application process and the huge number of applicants. That means you can’t get any face time unless you know someone who knows someone.” If age bias existed without the Internet, it has become easier to apply—intentionally or unintentionally—using electronic applications, which may require dates of college degrees. That is why personal relationships become even more critical for older job seekers.

According to Mark Anderson of ExecuNet, it is easiest to build a network when you are clear about your passion and you can connect yourself with people who have similar interests.

Michael C.’s successful career as an information technology and strategy executive in a major bank ended prematurely. After an entrepreneurial fling, he rediscovered his strong interest in federal financial regulatory policy.

Connecting with experts in that field led him to propose a new research center at a major university, which he was asked to lead. Discovering his zeal for an area let him naturally develop and then demonstrate expertise, which connected him to people with related interests.

These connections are more likely to be a source of new job opportunities than a network of individuals with unrelated interests.

Another executive used networking to enable a successful transition when he spent several years making key connections before retiring. “He was thinking ahead, looking to build relationships that would lead him to the next opportunity,” said an executive recruiter.

This leader made connections with vendors in his industry, and became well known by speaking at conferences. He was able to use his industry contacts to open doors and join a small consulting group part-time at age 65 where he was still active and challenged.

Not all networking is about meeting people who might help a job seeker find work. It should also be about learning. Jeff Williams, founder of Bizstarters.com, coaches would-be entrepreneurs, many of whom are over 55. Williams said, “A lot of Boomers don’t understand Gen Ys, so they need to make a determined effort to spend time with people in their twenties and thirties.”

4) *DOS Is Dead: Update Computer Technology Skills*

The most consistent finding from our interviews was the need for older job seekers to update their computer skills as much as possible. “There’s

Find a volunteer organization with younger people. It’s an advantage to be able to say, ‘I’ve been working with 20-year-olds.’

— Jeff Williams,
Founder, Bizstarters.com

almost no job today where you don't have to know how to manipulate a computer," said Robert Skladany of RetirementJobs.com.

The inability to demonstrate basic computer literacy is going to be a big sorting factor in the coming years.

— Robert Skladany,
RetirementJobs.com

Most penalized are those who have dropped out of the workforce for five to ten years, having taken early retirement, or who have stopped to take care of an aging parent. Older job seekers in this category must invest considerable time in catching up on the technology.

But even Boomers who have been fully employed until recently find themselves scrambling to update their relevant skills. Failure to do so not only gives hiring managers another reason to screen out older candidates, but it also supports the argument that "they" will not fit in the culture.

David N., a 57-year-old unemployed human resources manager, realized that he should have stayed more current on his computing skills that are needed for networking before starting his job search. "I had no idea about the difference between instant messaging and Twittering," he said. "Now, I'm on Facebook, but I haven't used it because I saw it as more social, but it's getting more professional use now. So my current agenda includes upgrading my Facebook account, and I continue to expand my network on LinkedIn."

Any older job seeker who does not know what these applications are needs to go learn about them—fast. That does not mean aging Boomers have to reorganize their lives around the latest communication and networking technologies. But they should at least have tried them out and

be able to talk about them, so they are not caught unprepared the next time they are talking to a 40-year-old hiring manager, who asks, "Are you on Twitter™?"

Learning about new technologies, or even older technologies, needed on the job is not just a problem for older job seekers. It has become a fact of life for virtually all workers. And gaps in technology knowledge become most visible during job transitions.

The laid off 69-year-old technical writer we interviewed realized that she had to update her Microsoft® Office skills once she began looking at potential jobs. "I noticed a job posting where they wanted someone primarily to create PowerPoint slides with graphs and animation. That might have been a good job for me. But prospective employers seem to want someone who has already done the exact job rather than someone who has many credentials and the ability to learn new skills quickly."

Workers of all ages face the problem of keeping current with technology today. But older job seekers, in particular, must invest time to address this challenge directly if they hope to stay competitive.

5) *Do the Math—Then Manage Your Ambivalence*

It is a little late for most older Baby Boomers to start planning their retirement finances, but they should recognize the conflicting pressures they are going to feel about work and retirement. On the one hand, there are financial needs in retirement that are consistently underestimated.

Art Koff of RetiredBrains.com explained: "They don't realize they're going to spend more than \$250,000 for health care. That figure represents, first, the cost of health care premiums deducted from Social Security, as well as the costs of any supplemental policy and any medical

Wishful Thinking Is *Not* a Job Search Method

People are still not aware of the absolutely huge costs of health care even after Medicare kicks in.

— Art Koff,
RetiredBrains.com

expenses not covered by either of those two plans. And that doesn't include the costs of long-term care or over-the-counter drugs."

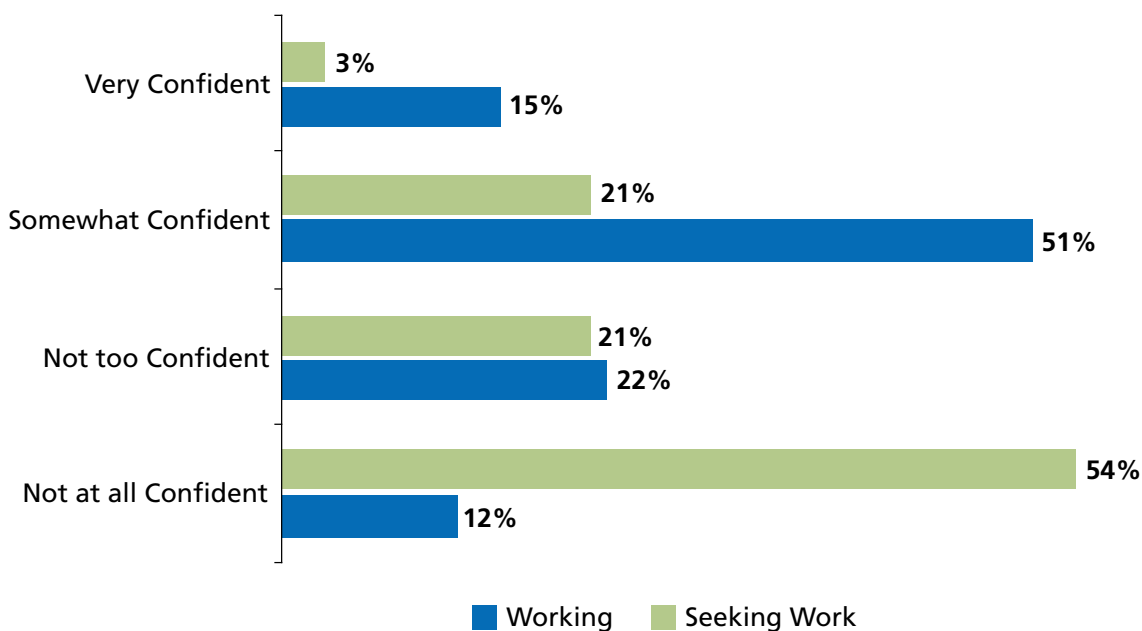
In terms of overall retirement savings (see *Endnote 3*), the survey showed 66% of those working felt confident they would have enough money to live into their mid-eighties, compared to 25% of those seeking work. The relatively high level of confidence among those working was a little surprising, considering 59% of this group reported less than \$250,000 in retirement

savings. At the same time, 67% of those seeking work reported total investable and disposable assets of less than \$50,000.

Despite the clear but not well understood financial need, a significant segment of our interview sample expressed serious ambivalence about continuing to work.

Job counselors also shared stories of program participants consistently sabotaging job interviews, because they were torn about succeeding in their quest for work. There is no easy answer to this dilemma of a waning drive to work, despite a clear financial need. But older job seekers may be more successful if they are absolutely clear about their actual financial needs, especially for consistent and stable sources of retirement income, even as they struggle with some ambivalence about continuing to produce wage and salary income.

Figure 9: Confidence in Retirement Savings



Question: How confident are you that you (and your spouse/partner) will have enough money to live comfortably if either or both of you live to 85 or more years of age?

Planning to Be a Successful Older Worker

Lessons for Mid-Career Workers

So far, this study has focused on what older job seekers should be doing today to increase their chances of success. But what about the millions of mid-career workers (ages 35 to 50) who have a few more years to prepare for working when they are older? What lessons can they learn from older Boomers, many of whom are being forced to work longer without any advance warning? Given that most mid-career workers will probably have to work well into their sixties or later, what can they be doing today to be a better prepared older worker tomorrow?

I have these two conflicting voices in my head. I plan to die at my desk like my dad did, and I do not want to die at my desk like my dad did.

— 65-year-old small business owner

We asked everyone interviewed for this study, “What advice would you give a 48-year-old today, so these mid-career workers can be more successful in the job market a decade from now?” These experts from the front line of the employment challenge identified at least six things mid-career workers should attend to now.

1) Engage in Continual Self-Evaluation

“It used to be that many companies would manage your career. Now it’s up to you,” said David Corbett, founder of New Directions, a firm that helps senior executives and professionals through career transitions.

One approach is to continually seek out opportunities for psychological and skills

testing that will give you better insight into your strengths and may identify things you are doing that could hurt your career. Another approach, Corbett suggested, is to handpick a small group, a sort of personal board of advisors, who know you well and who can give you honest feedback on your unique assets and where they fit.

2) Evaluate How Skills Fit in a Changing Market

In addition to more personal evaluations, mid-career workers should also periodically assess themselves in the context of the competition. “We have a lot of people coming through here who were vice presidents in their last jobs, but they were only put there so they wouldn’t do any damage,” said one veteran employment counselor. When evaluating your real skill set and what value you can add, also ask, “What can I expect in the market should I lose my job?”

One way to find out is to act as if your current position is in jeopardy and go on some job interviews. One older worker did this and learned how her experience was viewed by others, and also how much new material she had to learn to stay current in her field. If your skills inventory comes up short, try to identify what capabilities you need to make yourself more valuable and competitive long term.

We encourage clients to think of themselves as self-employed. If you want to be prepared to succeed in your fifties, you need to continually assess your skills to make sure they are in sync with the marketplace.

— David Corbett,
Founder, New Directions



3) *Have a Plan for the Next Stage*

Any plan will almost certainly change, but having one for the kind of work you would like to be doing in your sixties will focus your energy and resources toward taking the steps necessary to be prepared.

One question to ask is: “Would I be capable of doing what I’m doing today beyond age 63 to 65?” If the answer is “no,” then you should start training for a new type of work by your mid-fifties. Having a plan for work will also encourage you to do the financial planning necessary to evaluate how practical your expectations are for the amount and type of work you hope to do.

Michael Burnham, CEO of MyNextPhase.com, told the story of a man who dreamed that he would spend his retirement traveling around Europe drinking wine in great chateaux. But this man’s financial advisor said, given the man’s retirement savings, that this dream was unrealistic. So, instead, this man began

working two days a week in a retail wine store to supplement his retirement income. “His career is totally different than he expected,” said Burnham. “The wine retailer is ecstatic because the guy really knows wines, and wholesalers roll out the red carpet when he travels to places like Chile because he is now part of the industry.” Once you know what you want and can afford to do for work, find out how to prepare for the next stage.

4) *Invest in Your Own Development*

Whether you plan to stay in your field or move to a new one, you need to keep learning. In today’s dynamic business environment, if you are not continually learning and developing new skills or areas of expertise, you are becoming less valuable to your organization. Developing knowledge about the latest relevant computer technologies is an important part of this ongoing personal development. But you may also need additional education to pursue work in different



fields. Do not wait until it is too late to get the degrees or certificates you need.

For example, one executive wanted to become a community college teacher, so he explored what the requirements were and offered to teach adult education classes in the meantime. In the process, he learned he would need a master's degree to do the teaching he wanted. He obtained the degree and has gone on to become a teacher.

“The mistake people make is they act as if work in the future is the same as work in the past,” said Burnham. “But you need to develop a transitional game plan. If you do not have a plan, work stays vague.”

5) *Never Stop Building Your Personal Support Network*

People often believe the network that exists in the context of their current job is the same network that they can access when they leave the organization. One senior vice president of human resources learned the hard way that a lot of people paid attention to her only because of her role. When she left the company, her connections, which her new employer was counting on, dried up and were of no use.

“People spend way too much time focusing inside their organization, and they fail to build

We tell people to take one lunch a week to spend time with people outside of their current circle. And don't look at it as building for retirement. You should be preparing for a change that will probably come in two to four years from now anyway.

— **Mark Anderson,**
ExecuNet



the external networks needed to bring long-term success,” said Mark Anderson of ExecuNet.

6) *Expect the Unexpected*

No matter how much you plan and prepare, life and the market are almost sure to throw you a curve as you move into your fifties, and you do not want to be caught flat-footed.

“You should always have an up-to-date, good looking resumé on file,” said one veteran sales executive. “You never know when a headhunter might call. And you always want to recognize that tomorrow you might have to start a new job search. You cannot let yourself get into a comfort zone. That's the only way you can control your career in the 21st Century.”

Conclusion

While the journey to becoming an older worker is sometimes unexpectedly difficult and even painful, a lot of these stories end well.

- › Divorced and bankrupt at 55, after being laid off from his job as an operations manager in the cable TV industry, **Earl Y.*** has experienced a rockier path. In the last decade, he has had more than eight jobs. Today, he is a training coordinator for an employment program in Vermont.

“In the last 10 years I’ve gotten knocked down a lot, but I’ve also had some of the best experiences of my life. I learned I have all these things I can do, so I just keep getting up. The key is recognizing that if you’ve been successful in one area, you’ve a great chance of success in another one. But it’s up to you. I keep telling people they have to reinvent themselves.”

- › **Francine R.** came home from church a couple of years ago to a note from her husband of 40 years, saying he was leaving her. At 63, Francine had no job, no income, and no work history, which meant she could not qualify for Social Security.

Today, she has what she considers a dream job as a receptionist, switchboard operator, and bilingual tour guide for a major health care foundation. “This is the best time of my life,” she gushed. “I have more hope and higher expectations than I have had in 40 years. It is exciting to be me right now.”

- › **Michael C.** took early retirement from his senior executive position in a major bank, but soon discovered that sitting on the sidelines was very unsatisfying. He also learned that, unlike his father, he was not cut out to be an entrepreneur.

Today, at 56, Michael heads an emerging academic research center devoted to addressing issues of regulatory reform. “We lost a lot of retirement savings in the recession, and I have to accept the fact that instead of retiring early I’ve entered the next phase of my career,” he said. “That’s great because I learned I’m not cut out for retirement. But that also means I don’t have the luxury of just letting things happen to me anymore. There is too much competition, and I have to plan more.”

Many aging Boomers are unexpectedly going to experience being in the job market in the next few years. This study shows that being an older job seeker can be a nightmare or an adventure—or both.

Some people are going to be dealt a bad hand when it comes to late-career employment—poor health, lack of skills and education, or an undesirable location. But many aging Boomers will have more options and chances to be successful than they realize. Those who are most likely to prosper will be those who listen and learn from others who have already been there.

* The names of all older job seekers in this study have been changed to protect their privacy.

Implications

This report has important implications for aging Boomers whose limited retirement savings suggest a strong need to work longer than traditionally expected. Here are some of the most important lessons:

1) *One size does not fit all when it comes to job search and career strategies for older job seekers.*

There clearly is significant variation within this growing group of older job seekers. Generalizing about the employment needs of aging Baby Boomers is unproductive and even misleading. And putting these generalizations in practice is sure to result in ineffective solutions and wasted resources. In short, we should not try to impose strategies or tactics from one segment of this demographic group to another.

For example, a healthy 68-year-old with unique technical expertise still valued in the marketplace, who only wants to work part-time, should take a very different approach to the job market than a 58-year-old retail clerk with minimal retirement savings who has just been laid off.

Policy makers, career coaches, training and development counselors, and aging job hunters themselves must take into account variations in age, types of skills, work situation wanted, and technology orientation when talking about “older job seekers” and especially in developing practical job search strategies within this demographic group.

2) *Test assumptions about the job market to improve your understanding of what really works.*

The seven false assumptions identified in this study, as often held by older job seekers, reflect

a major disconnect between this growing demographic group and the job market. There are three ways to use these dysfunctional beliefs productively:

- A) First, those currently looking for work should test their own vulnerability to these assumptions. How many of them are an operational part of their current job search strategy? How are they undermining their success?
- B) Second, use the assumptions that are most relevant to their situations to identify what the market really wants from them. Is it a different work relationship (e.g., part-time, contract work)? Is it more clearly communicating their value, or the need for better technology skills?
- C) Third, job seekers can use the seven assumptions as cues for new ways of thinking about how to approach the job market. For example, if they have been letting their experience speak for itself without much success, what could they be doing differently to reframe their track record as a source of future value for potential employers?

3) *Remember, wishful thinking does not produce a job. It takes action.*

Many aging Boomers, like previous generations, have drifted toward retirement with little explicit preparation. But, as many studies have shown, changes in life expectancy, increased health care costs, low levels of retirement savings, and increased expectations about working longer, are conspiring to make planning and action essential for creating an effective transition to retirement.

Implications

There are many excellent books and workshops designed to teach Baby Boomers how to prepare for this new stage of life. What has been missing in this growing body of work is empirical evidence of how older job seekers actually misunderstand the employment market and what the market expects of them.

Finally, also missing are the steps needed to reconcile this disconnect, which leads to so many older job seekers failing to find acceptable work. The five success factors outlined in this report reflect a very practical response to the realities of the job market, as it is experienced by older job seekers. It also serves as a set of recommendations that takes into account the broad socio-economic differences—and options—of aging Boomers.

4) *Plan today to be a successful older worker tomorrow.*

One of the most important contributions of this study can be to encourage dialogue among mid-career workers (those ages 35 to 50) about what the changing relationship between work and retirement means for them today.

The alarm has been sounded for decades. Still, many older Baby Boomers will claim they never saw their present predicament coming. But, as many mid-career workers watch older Boomers struggle with late-career employment issues in the next decade, they will not be able to plead such ignorance. The dynamics of the job market for aging workers have become clearer in this study.

No doubt, future research will paint an even more detailed picture about the realities of looking for work after age 55. The question is: Will those who have a decade to prepare for the employment market they will inevitably face late in their career now take advantage of this opportunity?

What Can Employers Do?

Some organizations, such as hospitals and a few retailers, actively solicit older job candidates because they recognize the value they can add in particular roles. But, generally, companies shy away from hiring aging Baby Boomers. As the economy improves, however, and the need for talent increases, older workers will become a more attractive option for many organizations.

1) Invest in career planning workshops for current employees.

Older workers who do not have a plan for creating the next stage of their lives tend to be frustrated and think in terms of narrower options, said Howard Stone, a coach who helps people “skip retirement.”

He advised helping employees work in groups to develop their own vision of what comes next. “As soon as they start getting excited about the future, what happens today becomes more interesting and people start to love their jobs more,” added Stone. Helping valued mature employees think about their long-term plans does not guarantee they will stay on the job longer, but they are likely to be more fully engaged while they are with an organization.

2) Find creative ways to identify high-potential (older) job candidates.

No organization can afford to be overwhelmed with unqualified applicants, so it can be helpful to find ways to identify high-potential candidates more effectively. The Vermont Country Store is a major online retailer that is often looking for good call center staff. The company has made available its call center computer lab for training people in one “ages 55+” jobs program.

The participants are trained in customer service skills and computer literacy, before being sent out job hunting. Accessing the computer lab reduces the cost of training for program sponsors and the Vermont Country Store gets a head start observing participants whom the firm might want to hire.



3) Look for situations where older workers' experience and expertise can add special value.

In certain knowledge-intensive businesses where specialized expertise is especially important, aging Boomers can be a particular asset when their know-how is brought into an organization on a project or contracting basis. As more Boomers retire and their expertise is lost, companies are also going to depend more on retirees to backfill important roles until replacements can be developed.

YourEncore has created a network of 5,000 retired engineers and scientists who can be hired temporarily to bring their special know-how to bear on performance problems or innovation opportunities. For example, P&G brought a new diaper product to market a year ahead of schedule by applying the special virtual modeling expertise of a former Boeing systems engineer whom they brought on board for the project.

4) Identify environmental factors most attractive to older workers.

As the retention of good performers becomes increasingly important in the years ahead, managers will need to pay more attention to aspects of the work environment that attract and retain older workers. Failing to do this will lead more veteran employees to retire as soon

as it is financially feasible. It will also make it more difficult to draw from the growing pool of older job seekers.

For example, employers who design late-night or early-morning shifts, and who create positions with limited social interaction, are much less likely to successfully recruit older candidates into those jobs. Unlike younger candidates, older job seekers are more likely to turn down work situations that they find unappealing, even when they need the income.

Needing to be at work too late or too early and working in isolated jobs are examples of roles usually unattractive to older workers. Likewise, benefits can be tailored to more flexibly match the needs and preferences of workers. Prior studies have shown that these responses can improve the engagement of all employees in the organization's objectives.

5) Re-examine whether having the job application process entirely online is excluding qualified candidates.

The rush to cut costs and improve efficiency has led more and more organizations to move their job application process entirely online. Ironically, this is screening out job candidates who might be highly qualified for certain positions. They cannot apply, however, because they lack access to computers and computer skills.

"We've got mature workers who are master carpenters, who should be shoo-ins for any home improvement store, who can't get to the interviewing process because they don't know how to complete the online application," said Joan Cirillo, head of Operation ABLE in Boston, a training and employment program for older workers. As the economy picks up and recruiting becomes more competitive again, some firms may find they benefit by offering an alternative paper-based application process for certain types of jobs.

Methodology

Exploratory research like this is designed to uncover and frame rich, complex issues. This study is based on research data from three qualitative data sources. One data source was detailed qualitative interviews. Twenty-four interviews were conducted with leading executive coaches, job counselors, and others who are experts in working with older job seekers.

Because aging Boomers represent a broad range of socio-economic categories, we sought out experts who work with highly paid executives and business owners, as well as those who work with successful, skilled professionals, and those who run training programs for low-skilled older job seekers.

Second, we conducted in-depth interviews with 21 people ages 55+, who have gone through a change in employment in the last two years. The interview sample was equally divided

between men and women, and it included participants with a broad range of work experiences from senior executives, lawyers, and government policy analysts to pest exterminators and dishwashers.

Finally, quantitative information was obtained from a survey of 1,242 U.S. residents, ages 55 to 70, who were working or seeking work, or who reported being retired because they could not find work. An oversample was surveyed to achieve a significant amount of job seekers. The survey was conducted online by Harris Interactive in May 2009.

Data were weighted for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region, and household income. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online. See Appendix for a complete list of survey questions and answers.

Respondent Demographics

Employment Status

Working: **84%**
Seeking work: **15%**
Retired/unable to find work: **2%**

Age

55–60: **60%**
61–65: **30%**
66–70: **11%**

Gender

Male: **51%**
Female: **49%**

Marital Status

Married/living with partner: **68%**
Single/divorced/separated: **24%**
Never married: **8%**

Income

Less than \$50,000: **31%**
\$50,000–\$99,999: **29%**
\$100,000 or more: **25%**

Education

High school or less: **30%**
Some college: **28%**
College graduate or more: **43%**

Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding or non-response.

Appendix: The MetLife Aging Boomer Job Market Survey Questions and Answers

QUESTIONS	ANSWERS OFFERED / % SELECTED						
<p>What are the primary reasons you have been unable to find work?*</p> <p><i>Base: Currently seeking work or retired and unable to find work.</i></p>	Cannot find an employer who will hire someone my age 43%	Cannot find a job offering the type of work I want 34%	Cannot find a job in the geographic location I want 24%	Cannot find any job 21%	Cannot find a job offering the flexibility I want 14%	Cannot find a job with the compensation/benefits I want 8%	Other 12%
<p>Within the past two years, has your expectation about when you will stop working for pay changed? Are you now expecting to stop working for pay...?</p>	Later than expected 50%	No change 44%	Earlier than expected 6%				
<p>Why are you now expecting to stop working for pay earlier?*</p> <p><i>Base: Expecting to stop working earlier.</i></p>	Loss of job/job opportunities 55%	Eligible for Social Security benefits 23%	Eligible for company-provided pension benefits/401K benefits 18%	Health reasons 16%	Have adequate retirement resources 14%	Other 10%	
<p>How much earlier than you expected will you/did you stop working for pay?</p> <p><i>Base: Expecting to stop working earlier.</i></p>	Less than 1 year 6%	1 to 2 years 54%	3 to 5 years 25%	More than 5 years 14%	Not sure 1%		
<p>Why are you now expecting to stop working for pay later?*</p> <p><i>Base: Expecting to stop working later.</i></p>	Recover/rebuild financial resources for retirement 67%	Need to supplement pension/Social Security benefits 41%	Need company-provided health benefits 28%	Enjoy working 15%	Need to pay for unexpected health care costs 4%	Other 7%	
<p>How much later than you expected will you/did you stop working for pay?</p> <p><i>Base: Expecting to stop working later.</i></p>	Less than 1 year 1%	1 to 2 years 18%	3 to 5 years 44%	More than 5 years 25%	Not sure 12%		
<p>At what age do you expect to stop working for pay completely?</p> <p><i>Base: Currently working or seeking work.</i></p>	55–60 4%	61–65 27%	66–70 47%	71–75 12%	76+ 10%		
<p>Which of the following best applies to you?</p> <p><i>Base: Receiving retirement benefits from a previous employer.</i></p>	I have previously retired, but found it necessary to look for/return to work within the last two years, primarily for financial reasons 30%			I have previously retired, but voluntarily began looking for work/returned to work within the last two years, primarily for non-financial reasons 20%			None of the above 50%

*Multiple responses permitted.

(continued...)

Appendix: The MetLife Aging Boomer Job Market Survey Questions and Answers

QUESTIONS	ANSWERS OFFERED / % SELECTED						
How many hours per week do you (currently/want to) work for pay? <i>Base: Currently working or seeking work.</i>	Less than 10 hours per week 5%	10–20 hours per week 10%	21–34 hours per week 15%	35–40 hours per week 43%	41–50 hours per week 21%	More than 50 hours per week 5%	Not sure 3%
If you are working part-time, would you prefer to be working full-time? <i>Base: Currently working.</i>	No 26%	Yes 7%	Not working part-time 67%				
What are the primary reasons you are working/looking for paid work?*	Need income for basic expenses 55%	Want income to maintain current lifestyle 53%	Want to stay active and engaged 51%	Need to recover/rebuild additional retirement savings 44%	Not yet eligible for retirement benefits 40%	To retain or acquire health insurance 39%	
	Want income to enhance lifestyle 35%	Want the opportunity to do meaningful work 33%	Enjoy the social interaction with co-workers 30%	My pension is currently not adequate 27%	Other 7%	Not sure 1%	
Please indicate on a scale from 1 to 10 how much you agree with the following statement: I am satisfied with the job I have now. <i>Base: Currently working.</i>	Top 3 (Net) 61%	Middle 4 (Net) 34%	Bottom 3 (Net) 5%				
Which of the following best describes the job held during most of your life?	Technical/Sales/Administrative Support/Trade 26%	Executive/Administrative/Managerial 23%	Medical/Legal/Professional/Consultant 8%	Self-Employed Business Owner/Service Provider 8%	Educator/Teacher/Professor 7%	Service 6%	
	Operator/Laborer 5%	Craftsman/Repairman 2%	Homemaker 1%	Farming/Forestry/Fishing 0%	Other 14%		
How confident are you that you (and your spouse/partner) will have enough money to live comfortably if either or both of you live to 85 or more years of age?	Very confident 13%	Somewhat confident 47%	Not too confident 22%	Not at all confident 18%			
In your current job, how would you describe your earnings? <i>Base: Currently working.</i>	Earning much more than expected 2%	Earning somewhat more than expected 10%		Earning about what expected 52%	Earning somewhat less than expected 26%		Earning much less than expected 11%
Within the last two years, have any of the following applied to you?	I have pursued additional skills/ training that was required in my current or a future job 11%		I have pursued additional skills/ training that I felt would benefit me in my job or future employability 11%		Both of the above 14%	None of the above 63%	

*Multiple responses permitted. Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Endnotes

- 1) "Working After Retirement: The Gap Between Expectations and Realities," Pew Social-Demographic Trends Study, September 21, 2006, <http://pewsocialtrends.org/pubs/320/> [accessed 5/8/09].
- 2) Ibid, 2006; "Will More of Us Be Working Forever? The 2006 Retirement Confidence Survey" by Ruth Helman, et. al., Employee Benefit Research Institute, Issue Brief No. 292, April 2006, http://www.ebri.org/pdf/EBRI_IB_04-2006_1.pdf. "Economy Drives Confidence to Record Lows; Many Looking to Work Longer," The 2009 Retirement Confidence Survey by Ruth Helman, et. al., Employee Benefit Research Institute, Issue Brief No. 328, April 2009. http://www.ebri.org/publications/ib/index.cfm?fa=ibDisp&content_id=4226.
- 3) Ibid, Helman et. al., 2009. According to a study by the Employee Benefits Research Institute, 45% of older workers have less than \$25,000 in retirement savings and investments, while only 20% of workers 45+ report assets of \$250,000.
- 4) Mitra Toossi, "Labor force projection to 2016: more workers in their golden years," *Monthly Labor Review*, November 2007, pp. 33-52.
- 5) In the *MetLife Aging Boomer Job Market* survey, more than 60% of those working or seeking work report retirement savings (i.e., investable and disposable assets) of less than \$250,000. The *Retirement Confidence Survey* done by the Employee Benefits Research Institute in January 2009 actually found 80% of workers ages 45+ had retirement savings of less than \$250,000 (see *Endnote 3*). The variation in the findings may be attributed to the fact that the *MetLife* survey included only respondents ages 55+, who have had more time to accumulate retirement savings.
- 6) Op. Cit., Pew Social-Demographic Trends Study, September 21, 2006.
- 7) Ibid, 2006; Op. Cit., Helman et. al., 2006. Op. Cit., Helman et. al., 2009.
- 8) One of the most problematic ways of differentiating older job seekers is by income level. That is partly because workers who have had relatively high-skill careers, which usually mean higher incomes, may opt for lower skill and lower income roles, to reduce stress and work hours, as they get older. In addition, the employment of low-skill men has been in steady decline since the 1960s. While one factor is clearly decreased employer demand, Munnell, A.H. et. al. (2009) have identified several complicating factors that have diminished the need for this low-skill group to stay employed.

Thus, while we tried to access low-skill workers in this research, the study should be interpreted as focusing primarily on those who expect or want to work as they get older, which is more likely to be moderately or highly skilled job seekers. For more on the issues of older lower-skilled workers, see Munnell, A.H. et. al. "Can the Bottom Third Work Longer?" Boston College Center for Retirement Research, January 2009, Research Note No. 9-1.
- 9) "Regional and State Employment and Unemployment: June 2009," Bureau of Labor Statistics News, July 17, 2009. http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/laus_07172009.htm [accessed 7/28/09].
- 10) This "Get over it" approach to age discrimination was definitely the predominant attitude of the employment coaches and counselors we interviewed. Of course, not everyone is willing to ignore perceived instances of age bias. Complaints of age discrimination in employment filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission increased nearly 30% from 2007 to 2008. Complaints were expected to continue increasing due to layoffs of older workers during the latest recession.

Several recent decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court, however, are widely viewed as making it much harder to prove age discrimination. "EEOC Weighs Action to Counter Age-Bias Rulings," by Sam Hananel, The Associated Press, July 15, 2009. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory?id=8093908> [accessed 7/24/09].
- 11) "Identifying the National Pool of Older Workers Eligible for Senior Community Service Employment Programs and Their Current and Projected Unmet Service Needs," by Andrew Sum et. al., Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, prepared for Senior Service America, Silver Springs, MD, August 2008.
- 12) "Most One-Stop Career Centers Are Taking Multiple Actions to Link Employers and Older Workers," GAO Report 08-548, April 2008.
- 13) DOS stands for "Disk Operating System." It was the first widely installed operating system for personal computers, used in the 1980s and early 1990s.
- 14) Section title is adapted from *Hope Is Not a Method: What Business Leaders Can Learn from America's Army* by Gen. Gordon Sullivan and Michael Harper, NY: Broadway Books, 1997.
- 15) "Boomers Move to Self-Employment" by Ashlea Ebeling, Forbes, July 2, 2009.

The MetLife Mature Market Institute *Searching for the Silver Bullet: Leading Edge Solutions for an Aging Workforce* study and *Engaging the 21st Century Multi-Generational Workforce Tool Kit* both provide additional background and insights about workforce issues confronting today's employers. They have practical, action-oriented responses for creating solutions that employers can use to successfully navigate the challenging and rapidly changing times they face. These resources are available free of charge at www.MatureMarketInstitute.com.

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